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ABSTRACT

This essay relates the way educator Dorothy Howard intuitively used intercultural education techniques to motivate students. Howard encouraged students to relate home experiences and family traditions when fulfilling writing assignments. She also used the rhymes, rhythms, and metaphors of playground games to study poetry, grammar, composition, and other literature, finding students more receptive to learning through this methodology. The essay presents Howard's experiences as an unwitting exemplar of a progressive teacher with an understanding of education and folklore as processes for learning. (DQE)

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A History Lesson in Folklore in Education: Dorothy Howard

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Successful and valid use of folklore in the schools depends on teachers who know what folklore is ... and know how to teach children... (Howard: 1950: 106)

In 1950, Dorothy Howard's qualifications to say such a thing were well in order. Writing as a Professor of English and Chair of the English Department at the State Teachers College in Frostburg, Maryland, Howard had at least thirty years of experience in teaching public school and in documenting children's traditions. She was one of many who wrestled with the everpresent problem of how to get children to learn, and she was a progressive educator who found the answer in the traditions of children themselves.

Most of us who have an interest in children's play are familiar with Dorothy Howard's work. Her autobiography of the first eight years of her life -- Dorothy's World: Childhood in the Sabine Bottom, 1902 - 1910 -- is applauded as one of the most thorough examinations of childlife today, and it is considered "must" reading. According to Syllvia Grider, Howard helped to bridge the gap between the late nineteenth century approaches to play as survivals and twentieth century approaches to studying and analyzing play as a dynamic force in intellectual, physical, and social

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development. She took her data from direct observations of and interactions with children, and she published extensively in the Journal of American Folklore, Folklore, Keystone Folklore Quarterly, Western Folklore, and the New York Folklore Quarterly between 1949 and 1984. Her articles are thoroughly documented collections and analyses of games she collected in the United States and Australia (where Howard was a Fulbright scholar between 1954 and 1955). Yet Howard's curriculum vitae indicates that she began her study of folklore when she was a teacher in 1930.

Howard's incorporation of folklore in the classroom is most visible in her classes in English grammar, literature, and composition. Having graduated from North Texas State Normal (Teaching) College in 1923, Howard became a teaching principal in a rural school in upstate New York in 1930. At that time she taught a poetry unit which the students did not take to. In the third person, she wondered: "Why?"

> Looking for causes, she learned that their experiences with poetry had included (1) homework memory assignments of (2) poems chosen by a teacher ... for (3) didactic purposes and (4) memorized as a chore to escape punishment.
>
> Then one Spring day at noon she stood at an open classroom pondering that problem, casually watching the children play on an unsupervised playground. Skip ropes were turning; marbles rolling; balls bouncing. Gradually she became aware of metaphoric, rhythmic language accompanying the body movements of the children. She heard:

> One, two, three, aleery/ Four, five, six aleery/ Seven, eight, nine, aleery/ Ten aleery, postman (for ball bouncing)

and

> All in together, girls/ Never mind the weather, girls (for rope skipping)

and

> Roll, roll, Tootsie roll/ Roll marble, in the hole (charm for marbles)

By the time the bell rang calling the children in, she [Howard] had counted on her fingers more than a dozen rhymes and formulae; and when the children came to class, rhymes, rhythms, and metaphors of the playground language were discussed. The next day, self-assigned homework was brought in, and by week's end, the class had a collection of more than two hundred playground rhymes.

It soon became clear to Dorothy that their [the students'] joy in poetry came from orchestrated body movements, including the voice. One class discussion led to another: metric and cadenced rhythms and sound-meaning (rollicking and frolicking as opposed to cold and bold). Discussions led to dramatic choral reading activities, to group creative verse writing, to individual creative writing, and to reading poetry in

> books, first to limericks, then to "Jabberwocky," and gradually to serious poems. (1977: 287 - 288)

Howard realized that she had latched on to a good thing, these playground rhymes, chants, and charms. They had acted as keys, tools for Howard's "pedagogical purpose: to open doors for children to the joys of literature in books, and to self-confidence and pleasure in developing their own power over language, manipulating and playing with words." (ibid: 289).

By 1934 Howard had moved to a teaching position in the junior and senior high schools in East Orange, New Jersey. Her students were primarily immigrant kids who were at once ashamed of their ethnicity and their English speaking skills. Howard turned to tradition again and found that her foreign students learned English correctly and fast on the playground. So again, Howard utilized children's traditional activity as a key to unlock the door to English grammar, speech, and composition.

Howard's dissertation, "Folk Jingles of American Children, A Collection and Study of Rhymes used by Children Today," was completed in 1938 at New York University. Howard introduced her dissertation as:

> ... a collection of current folk rhymes of children in this country. The collection includes modern versions of old rhymes and indigenous rhymes of modern American children... This collection deals with the environmental influences on the subject matter, the analysis of verse

> patterns, the literary and poetic qualities of the verse and an educational evaluation of the collection with its psychological implications in the play life of children. (1938:i)

The dissertation has three parts: (1) Origin and Migration of Children's Folk Rhymes; (2) a collection of rhymes, including taunts, autograph album rhymes, charms, and blessings; and (3) an exploration of the subject matter and literary characteristics of the rhymes. Howard's fieldwork involved direct observation as well as (and this smacks of 19th century reporting) reports sent to her by teachers and others who had direct access to kids' play. Her conclusions echoed what she had thought all along, that: (1) folklore was a process; (2) children's rhyming involves the whole body, including the voice; and (3) folklore has a distinct educational power.

After Howard received her doctorate, she resumed her work as an educator, armed with the conviction that traditions had a definite place in the learning environment and process.

Over Howard's fifty-five years of publishing, she described and explored thousands of games that she had observed. She explored the texts, their history, and structural make-up, but at all times she brought the texts back to the children, knowing that traditions have little value without tradition bearers. With her understanding and conviction Howard published two articles that best illustrate the way she used folklore in the classroom. The 1940 article, "The Bell Always Rang," was published in the

Elementary English Review and is a description of how students' names gave way to lessons in ethnicity , spelling, and composition. ""Our Own" in the Classroom" was published in Story Parade in 1941 as an account of a student whose compositions about his mother's Italian traditions helped him develop confidence as a writer.

The Bell Always Rang

In 1940, students were tracked into their respective classes to be with children of approximately the same IQ and physical abilities. Although the children were supposed to be alike intellectually, they were not alike culturally. Howard's "Seven-Six" class was one of those many diverse classes. Rather than "melt" the class, Howard found that ethnic diversity was useful as first a tool for spelling lessons and later as a point of entry into writing autobiographies and biographies:

> The Seven-Six class in the Davey School was playing a grammar game. Nouns! "Tony laughed at the teacher." Tony - subject of the verb - laughed. Another pupil shouted, "The teacher scolded Tony." Then came a chorus, "Tony - direct object of the verb, laughed." Tony became, in turn, an indirect object of a verb, an object of a preposition and a predicate nominative. Tony was a polite and inoffensive member of the class. The sentences seemed very funny to his classmates and to him. Donald wanted to make some sentences about Antoinette but he could not spell her name. Robert thought of a funny sentence about Camille, so he gave her a poke to ask her how to spell her name. Then

the teacher spoke.

"We need to have a spelling lesson of our names," she suggested. "What do you think about it?" A noisy approval of the suggestion banished the grammar game from thirty minds and the class was started on a new project which developed far beyond the simple plan the teacher had in mind when she suggested the spelling lesson.

Fifteen children wrote their names on the board that first day, each child telling what he knew of his name. He told where his last name came from and when it was brought to America, if he knew. He told, if he could, how he came by his first name and about his christening name. Italian children told the class the Italian spelling of their names. Stanley Kluczec told of his father who brought his name from Poland, of his grandfather, and of his great-grandfather who was born in Poland in 1823. Grace Sanfelipe knew that her father brought her name from Sicily and changed the spelling from San Felipe; she knew that Sanfelipe meant "Saint Philip." She told the class of her mother who fled Russia, went to Sicily, married her father and came to America. Shirley Schureman had a Dutch ancestor who was a spy. Her classmates gasped in excitement over the spy story. Mary LaSalle did not know her name was French until she went home and asked her mother about it. This led to a discussion of the probable origin of names, and language beginnings, to a consideration of our melting pot American language which has assimilated words from the languages of all the world.

A week later there was a spelling test on the fifteen names of the week before. The remaining fifteen pupils in the class wrote their names on the board and a great discussion followed. Many of the children had asked questions at home and brought back exciting stories of other days and other lands. Timid ones, who, the week before, had claimed ignorance of their family history, forgot their timidity and spontaneously told stories which received the appreciation of their classmates. Virginia Maskeleris' father and mother brought her name from Greece. Patricia Kavanaugh's grandfather came from Ireland and knew beautiful old folk tales [sic] which he embroidered with his own lively imagination and passed on to his grandchildren. Camille Marti's father and mother were French Swiss. Delsita McFall was named for a Spanish grandmother in Cuba.

The teacher asked the pupils if they would like to write down some of the interesting things they had told the class about their names and about themselves. There were no dissenting "No's." Paper was passed and a work period followed in which oral discussion became written record. The next day the period started with a discussion of paragraphing. The teacher suggested that the compositions of the day before could serve as introductory paragraphs in their life stories.

Our Own in the Classroom

This 1941 article focuses on one student, Danny, who was inspired to be a good writer after reading a 1936 issue of Story Parade. The problem is that Danny lacks the

confidence to be a good writer, and he expresses his doubts to his teacher, Dorothy Howard. She encourages Danny to think about his last story about making spaghetti, and the spark of Italian foodways gives rise to another story about Italian food in Danny's home:

> Danny's head was deep in a Story Parade - an old Story Parade with torn cover. November, 1936, it said. His seventh grade classmates were all scribbling.
>
> As teacher came close enough to read over Danny's shoulder "Our Own" and underneath it "My Hobbies," Danny looked up at her.
>
> "I wish I could write like that. But it takes brains," he said.
>
> "Yes," answered teacher. "It takes brains to write. And you have brains."
>
> "Not enough." Danny shook his head.
>
> Teacher sat down beside him. "Do you remember your spaghetti story?" She reminded him, "And how we all groaned with hunger when you told how your mother makes spaghetti -the other day - just before lunch - do you remember?
>
> "Sure," he laughed. "But that was talking," he insisted. "That wasn't writing."
>
> "If you write it down as you would talk, then the writing will be good writing."
>
> Danny made no answer. He was thinking. Soon he was thinking aloud - "I like raviolis better than spaghetti," he ventured aloud. "Last night, when I went home from school, my mother told me to hurry up and take off my jacket because I had

to help her make the raviolis for supper."

Teacher wrote it down as rapidly as she could. Danny paid her little attention. Danny laughed, remembering.

"I took off my jacket and ran into the kitchen, and my mother said, 'When I tell you to hurry to go to the store, you come to me as slow as molasses out of a jar.' (She

said that in Italian)."

"See," said teacher. "I am your secretary. I have written just what you have said. Can you finish it, or shall I?"

Danny read over his words before he answered. "I'll do it." And he took the pencil.

"She already had the dough ready, so, while she rolled out the dough, I went and got the pot cheese, the salt, the eggs, the parsley and my mother mixed them all together in the pot cheese. We made about fifteen or twenty. Then we made twenty more and I put them all on the bed on top of a white table cloth.

"At supper, my sister said, 'My! Oh my! Danny! You sure must be hungry. That's your ninth ravioli.'

"So I said, 'Why shouldn't I be hungry? After all, I helped make them.'"

(1941:5-6)

Howard had no intentions of making folklorists out of her students, therefore she

did not feel the need to explain that they were doing folklore and personal history. They were doing grammar and composition, drawing upon their personal ethnic history for something enjoyable and interesting to write about. But there is no doubt that Howard knew that she was fostering a little pride of heritage in her immigrant students. In "The Bell Always Rang," she speculates:

> Perhaps the League of Nations is not dead. No columned halls in Geneva but a classroom in East Orange is the setting. Representatives of world democracy are now twelve-year-old boys and girls deliberating peacefully the phenomena of languages, races, and nations. (ibid)

Howard was writing during the same time as the Service Bureau for Intercultural Education was working for what it called "cultural democracy." The Service Bureau was begun in 1929 with mission to foster intercultural harmony and patriotism through intensive exploration of ethnic groups' contributions to American progress, including traditions. Many publications came out of this organization as well as the National Education Association, describing social studies projects in schools across the United States that explored tradition and ethnicity. Little seems to have been done in English classes. [1]

I asked Dr. Howard if she was familiar with the work of intercultural educators, and she replied that she did not know of such educators. At first I was surprised because Howard's work seemed to fit in so well with the work of Rachel Davis DuBois

and her colleagues. Yet after giving it more thought, I realize that though Howard was not familiar with intercultural education, she was still a part of the movement that nurtured intercultural education -- progressive education.

Progressive education began as a movement in the early 1900s, influenced by such educators as John Dewey and Arthur C. Perry. The Progressive Education Association (PEA) was founded in 1919, and the membership's actions were guided by seven principles with regard to teaching and learning:

1. Freedom to develop naturally.
2. Interest, the motive of all work.
3. The teacher a guide, not a taskmaster.
4. Scientific study of pupil development.
5. Greater attention to all that affects the child's physical development.
6. Cooperation between school and home to meet the needs of child life.
7. The progressive school a leader in school movements.

(Perry: 1931:116)

There is much more to the movement than this, but progressive education can be described as a child-centered education informed by empirical observation and certain standardized tests. Progressive educators were very concerned with educating their students (whose intellectual abilities had been discerned through standardized testing) by appealing to their interests and then create activities out of those interests

so as to meet lesson objectives.

As a teacher, Howard combined her understanding of children's folklore, educational theory, and pedagogical style to follow at least six of the PEA's seven principles:

1. She allowed her students to develop naturally by viewing play as a positive activity and the playground as an "uncovered schoolroom" (Bache: 1839:166) for child-directed education in social, physical, and language skills.

2. Howard developed her classroom activities out of her students' personal experiences and interests and she was flexible (a sign of a true teacher) to change lessons in mid-flight to make lessons applicable to students' experiences while at the same time achieving objectives in grammar, literature, and composition.

3. Howard suggested that the class undertake a particular lesson; she did not act the role of a dictator. She suggested the spelling lesson of names; she suggested that Danny remember his spaghetti story to see how well he could compose his experiences.

4. Howard stayed abreast in the literature in education and folklore,

primarily via journals and books.

5. Howard paid constant attention to children's play as an important force in their physical, intellectual, and social development.

6. If Howard was not aware of her students' home situations, she would not have been attuned to the kids' interests or personal experiences.

Howard understood the complexities of folklore, what it is, and how to study it, and she understood the complexities of education, what that is, and how to effect it. But it was Howard's progressive stance as an educator that enabled her to tie her areas of expertise together to create successful lessons in grammar, composition, and literature from children's traditions and family history. A progressive stance, and an understanding of education and folklore as processes, makes Howard one of the earliest examples of a conscious specialist in folklore and education.

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Notes

1. More information can be found in: Rachel Davis DuBois, All This and Something More: Pioneering in Intercultural Education (Bryn Mawr, PA.: Dorrance and Company) 1984; Nicholas Montalto, A History of the Intercultural Education Movement, 1929-1941, (New York: Garland), 1982; National Education Association, Americans All: Studies in Intercultural Education, (Washington D.C.: National Education Association), 1942; and Janis Rosenberg, "Intercultural Education and Folk Arts in Education," Social Studies Teacher 10 (1) pp. 1,8, 10 (a revised version is in press for Southern Folklore).